

Terence Davies on His Siegfried Sassoon Biopic 'Benediction' and Why He Hates Jane Austen Films

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David Vintiner for Variety

[Terence Davies](#), that most meticulous of auteurs, returns to the Toronto International Film Festival with "[Benediction](#)," a lush biopic of Siegfried Sassoon, the poet and decorated veteran who became an outspoken critic of World War I. The film should be catnip for Davies admirers. It's another beautifully composed portrait of genius, repression and loneliness, and a film that compliments his last cinematic outing "A Quiet Passion," the acclaimed 2016 drama about Emily Dickinson.

"Benediction" stars Jack Lowden as Sassoon and charts his tortured romances with male lovers such as the screen star Ivor Novello, his break

with the ruling class over the conduct of the war, as while as his later embrace of religion. Ahead of the film's debut on Sept. 12, Davies spoke with *Variety* about what draws him to a project, his hatred for films based on Jane Austen novels and his general amazement that he has managed to build an audience thanks to an uncompromising resume of masterworks that includes "The Deep Blue Sea," "The Long Day Closes," and, now, "Benediction."

Why did you want to make a movie about Siegfried Sassoon?

World War I made him a great, great poet. He was gay, obviously, and he was always falling in love with the wrong man. He got married like a lot of gay men did during that period. And then he turned Catholic, which astonished me because I'm a lapsed Catholic. There are several parts of his character that I didn't want to touch. He loved cricket, but I didn't want to touch that. I think cricket is ball-numbingly tedious. And I don't agree with bloodsports. Hunting, I think, is wrong, so I avoided any of that even though he liked it. So instead I concentrated on the things in his character that I responded to, and what I found is that he was always searching for redemption. None of us can find redemption in other people or in other things. You have to find it yourself. At the end of his life, I think he was actually quite unfulfilled. That touched me enormously. All my films are about outsiders because I'm an outsider. I listened to everything because I'm the youngest of 10. I wasn't aware of it at first, but as I got older I realized I'm not a participant in life. I observe it. And when you're an outsider, you're usually ignored.

What did he want to be redeemed for? His sexuality? His experiences in the war? Why was he searching for atonement?

Where redemption is concerned, it wasn't one specific thing. Those things you mentioned would have been eased had he found redemption, but redemption is not about redeeming guilt. I think he wanted to feel worthy. Worthy of what, I don't know. In his case, I think he wanted the solace of God, which I wanted too. I prayed like anything, and no succor came. It was completely worthless and it made me feel worthless. I don't think he even

knew what he was searching for, which makes it feel even crueler in some way.

Did you feel a kinship with him?

I did, but I felt a kinship to Emily Dickinson too. She's another outsider and she didn't even get recognized in her lifetime. In a sense, the Emily Dickinson film is my most autobiographical. But there are parts of "Benediction" that are all me. "Why do you hate the modern world so?" "Because it's younger than I am." That line is all me.

Do you need to have that kind of identification when you make a movie?

No, it's more vague. If I respond to something, I know I can make a film about it. You have to have a certain aesthetic distance from the material. What I do know about Siegfried Sassoon or Emily Dickinson is that I identify so much with them that I come to know how they talk. What they say is as important as the way they say it. The thing about a lot of period films, especially in Britain, is that they speak in a modern language and it's ridiculous. You cannot have someone in 1815 saying, "Are we good to go?" Because they did not say that in 1815. It's the tone that's equally important. The things around them have to be true to the period. In "Benediction," Siegfried calls [his lover] Ivor Novello a cad, because that's what he would have thought. That's what you said in those days.

What kind of historical research did you do?

It's not just reading all the material that I can, I also watch films from that period like "Letters From an Unknown Woman" or "Kind Hearts and Coronets." It's something vague. You just feel it. It's like when an actor auditions, as soon as I see them, I don't know how, but I know they're right for a part. I get a feeling in my stomach. It's something instant and felt. When you're shooting, you have to feel the moment. You have to feel every single shot. You have to know when not to direct, and that's very important. I do

very little rehearsal, and I do very few takes. After seven takes, I get bored. It becomes repetitive. You have to capture an instant — that moment when the actor is still fresh.

For a film about a writer, there's very little writing in the movie. Was that a conscious decision?

There's nothing interesting in dramatizing that. You hear the poetry, and that's enough. The narrative line of his life is strong, so you don't have to show the writing.

Is cinema closer to poetry or prose?

It's closest to music.

The characters don't seem particularly closeted despite the fact that this took place at a time when homosexuality was criminalized. How would you describe their relationship with their sexuality?

They're privileged, so they can get away with it. That's where the privilege comes in. A lot of the upper-middle and upper class were bisexual or homosexual. Siegfried Sassoon knew literally everyone in society. When he was wounded, Winston Churchill and his mother came to visit him in the hospital.

What do you think of Siegfried Sassoon as a poet?

I think the war poetry endures. Some of that later poetry is heartbreaking and deals with loneliness and very often it's conveyed in just two stanzas. They're wonderful because they're diluted down to the bare essentials.

Are most artists lonely?

Not at all. A lot of them are very jolly. The one thing that unites artists is that you have to be truthful. Sometimes that's used against you, but that's the

risk you have to take.

Do you prefer if people watch your films on streaming services or do you want them to be seen on the big screen?

I want my films to be seen in cinemas, but I never really thought I'd even have any audience for them, certainly not one abroad. Personally, I don't go to the cinema anymore. When you make films, you become aware of the music, the acting, where the camera is, and in British films, there's a lot of the same people in all of them, so you just see a collection of mannerisms. It's so bad, you think, "I can't watch this." Jane Austen films, I refuse to watch. They are paralyzingly boring. The Brontes are much better. There's a bit more sex to them. Once you start making something, it's impossible not to see the structure. You just sit there calling out the shots — close up, close up, back to wide, and now another close-up or over-the-shoulder shot.

Do you watch your own movies after you finish them?

No. The few times I have watched them, all the faults rise to the surface. You remember how it rained all day or was freezing cold or how the bloody horse wouldn't move where you needed him to move. If I want to remember bits of a film, I run them in my head. I know what the shots were, but I can't stand to sit there. At film festivals, you have to watch your work and it's unbelievable agony. You sit there and think this shot goes on forever. The audience is going to be in a coma.